

PLAIN AND PRECIOUS THINGS LOST: THE SMALL PLATES OF NEPHI

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“And upon *these*,” Nephi writes, differentiating his smaller set of plates from the original historically focused record begun over thirty years prior, “I write the things of my soul” (2 Ne. 4:15). As he opens his intimate psalm, he establishes how much he personally values this second record and intends the writings thereon “for the learning and the profit of [his] children.” That Nephi designates this parallel diary for the paramount preaching of his and successive generations is evident in his explications of the text’s existence (1 Ne. 9:3–5; 19:1–3; 2 Ne. 5:29–32), as well as his directions to those who would subsequently keep and add to this sacred portion of his corpus (1 Ne. 6:6; 19:3; Jacob 1:2). He prioritizes this “small account” as the vessel for retaining the choicest Nephite teachings: “I, Nephi, received a commandment that the ministry and the prophecies, the more *plain and precious* parts of them, should be written upon *these* plates” (W of M 1:3; 1 Nephi 19:3, emphasis added).¹ Nephi clearly desires that his posterity treasure the writings on the “small plates” (Jacob 1:1), that they study and teach them (Jacob 1:1–4).

1. The phrase “plain and precious” appears seven times in 1 Nephi 13, during Nephi’s recorded vision (1 Ne. 11–14). Four times, these words specifically refer to “plain and precious things taken away from the book, which is the book of the Lamb of God” (1 Ne. 13:28, 29, 34). However, three more instances of “plain and precious” things appear in this chapter, and refer to “much of my gospel” (v. 34), which “thy seed . . . shall write” (v. 35), and that “shall make known the plain and precious things which have been taken away” (v. 40). In only one other instance does the phrase “plain and precious” appear in the Book of Mormon, wherein Nephi refers to the writings on the small plates. When Latter-day Saints refer to “plain and precious things,” they often speak of those writings eventually lost from the biblical record. For example, the Joseph Smith Translation entry in the Guide to the Scriptures relates that “The Joseph Smith Translation has restored some of the

Thus, having been assigned the highest value, the small plates would warrant the most conscientious treatment by authors throughout the Book of Mormon text. Presumably the doctrines, prophecies, and language on the small plates would be woven through subsequent writings, as those of Hebrew prophets in Jesus' day, the King James Bible in nineteenth-century America,² and Isaiah within portions of the Book of Mormon. Unexpectedly, however, this does not occur with Nephi's "plain and precious" record (1 Ne. 19:3).³ As Joseph Spencer muses, "That the small plates are never specifically mentioned again and are seldom quoted is somewhat confusing and one wonders how the small plates had become so marginalized over the course of the centuries."⁴ Despite Nephi's several exhortations to his posterity to "preserve these plates and hand them down" (Jacob 1:3) and "that the things which were written should be kept for the instruction of my people" (1 Ne. 19:3), his posterity seem unaware of their existence. Questions posed by Alma₂ in particular suggest that he does not possess the same understanding that is expressed in the books of Nephi and Jacob. The Book of Mormon prophets, therefore, do not exhibit consistent degrees of doctrinal and prophetic understanding.

Such inconsistencies may cause some readers to question the credibility of the text. Upon observing doctrinal and prophetic variation within the Book of Mormon, some dismiss the book's divinity. Conversely, others deny

plain and precious things that have been lost from the Bible (1 Ne. 13)" ("Joseph Smith Translation (JST)," Guide to the Scriptures, <https://www.lds.org/scriptures/gs/joseph-smith-translation-jst?lang=eng>). Bible Dictionary entries on the Joseph Smith Translation and Sermon on the Mount offer similar treatments of the phrase. The Topical Guide and index to the triple combination entries on the word "plain" offer verses from 1 Nephi 13 and 14, but not 1 Nephi 19:3. General conference addresses utilizing the phrase "plain and precious" also refer to 1 Nephi 13–14, but 1 Nephi 19:3 is likewise not mentioned.

2. See John S. Tanner, "The King James Bible in America: Pilgrim, Prophet, President, Preacher," *BYU Studies* 50, no. 3 (2011): 4–24.

3. Several authors have observed some parallels between the small plates and the books of Mosiah and Alma, such as John Hilton, "Jacob's Textual Legacy," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 2 (2013): 52–65, and Joseph M. Spencer, *An Other Testament: On Typology*, 2nd ed. (Provo: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2016). These will be addressed later in this article.

4. Spencer, *An Other Testament*, 125.

inconsistencies exist at all and attempt to interpret passages to support the book's unchanging truth, defending its authenticity.

Among others, Brent Metcalfe and Matthew Roper represent these two viewpoints.⁵ Metcalfe explains variation in Book of Mormon prophets' understanding by considering the dictation sequence.⁶ As Joseph's own language or ideas change over time, the language of the text parallels that variation when considered in dictation order. He presents as evidence the dictation's historical context, stylistic and textual development that appear parallel to the dictation sequence, and early prophecies unknown to subsequent prophets in the middle period. The text's ideological/prophetic development coincides with a Mosian priority dictation order. He therefore concludes that Joseph Smith is the primary creator of the text: "The composite of those elements . . . point to Smith as the narrative's chief designer."⁷

Responding directly to Metcalfe, Matthew Roper argues for unchanging prophetic understanding throughout the Book of Mormon.⁸ He reframes certain passages that Metcalfe cites and bypasses others, asserting that Benjamin and Alma exhibit the same prophetic understanding as Nephi and Lehi. While his argument against Metcalfe's differentiation between "Christocentric" and "penitent" baptism, among others, is persuasive, he overlooks key differences in spiritual knowledge clearly exhibited among various prophets.⁹ Further, his fundamental anxiety is more troubling: that variation in the spiritual knowledge exhibited by prophets somehow threatens the book's historicity and, therefore, validity.

5. Brent Lee Metcalfe, "The Priority of Mosiah: A Prelude to Book of Mormon Exegesis," in *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology*, edited by Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), 395–444, and Matthew Roper, "A More Perfect Priority?," review of "The Priority of Mosiah: A Prelude to Book of Mormon Exegesis," by Brent Lee Metcalfe, *FARMS Review of Books* 6, no. 1 (1994): 363.

6. Metcalfe, "The Priority of Mosiah."

7. *Ibid.*, 433.

8. Roper, "A More Perfect Priority?"

9. *Ibid.*, 367. Roper considerably reframes Alma 13:25 and overlooks Alma 7:8 and Alma 16:20 (*ibid.*, 363–65). These will be addressed later in this article.

Though the original discussion between Roper and Metcalfe ensued nearly three decades ago, many of the concerns they express perpetuate in scriptural discussions today. Both authors are tied up in an assumption: that if variation exists in the text, the book as a divine source of knowledge must be invalid. Readers may consider another approach to canonized texts: embracing changeableness, rather than unchangeableness, as a characteristic of scriptural texts. Variation need not invalidate sacred books. Rather, recognizing and exploring such variation can augment our understanding as we allow the text to be what it is.

Through examining the text of the Book of Mormon, I intend first to establish that scriptural texts can indeed exhibit variation in spiritual understanding and second, that such variation does not devalue sacred texts but can rather be insightful and, in the case of the Book of Mormon, align with and enrich the narrative. Before doing so, I first wish to preempt the possibility that readers may presume I subscribe to a particular theory that explains the text's dictation. I am not commenting on the historicity of the text nor the degree of divine involvement in the dictation process.¹⁰ Frankly, I keep rather aloof from such discussions, but prefer instead to focus on the document we all have before us. However, I will often refer to the Book of Mormon, in part or whole, as "record" or "history" because it refers to itself in this way through its characters/authors. Ultimately, the book remains a rich and mysterious complexity. Assumptions have perpetuated that are not only illogical but do a disservice to the text. Here I seek to expose the problematic nature of some of these assumptions, hopefully lending the text its due respect and wonder. I therefore offer an alternate reading to those presented by Metcalfe and Roper and others they may represent: that a careful examination of the Book of Mormon text presents a literary case

10. I do not deny the possibilities that Joseph Smith may have been influenced by his environment, that he uses the language of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts, or that the dictation sequence aligns with and explains some of the language and understanding exhibited within the text. However, I believe that attempting to explain the text solely through this lens is an incomplete approach.

that, sometime in the generations before Alma, the small plates of Nephi and the teachings thereon are lost or obscured from view.¹¹

Sources of Evidence

Many textual indications in the Book of Mormon suggest that the Nephites were unaware of the spiritual knowledge present on the small plates during the middle period. Evidence for this possibility is subsumed under a few categories. The strongest case is provided by direct evidence: certain doctrines and prophecies—clearly written on the small plates—are longed for and overtly acknowledged as absent or unknown. At times this sought-for understanding develops throughout the middle period (the second century BC, according to the text) as it is obtained through diligent searching, revelation, and at times angelic visitation, but previous teachings are not referenced. Another type of textual clue is more circumstantial and includes prophecies, concepts, or phrases that are simply absent during the middle period but present in the writing of Mormon and (mostly) Moroni. This evidence is abundant but only correlational and does not in itself demonstrate the Nephites' lack of access to the small plates. Considered in addition to direct evidence, however, and taken into account as an entire body, it corroborates the case for the Nephites' unawareness of the small plates during the middle period. In addition to these specific textual clues, the broader contextual narrative demonstrates a principle that spiritual knowledge increases or decreases based on people's attentiveness to it. This offers a possible rationale for the small plates' absence, as well as the depreciation and eventual reacquisition of spiritual knowledge and teachings thereon.

"Now as to this thing I do not know. . ." (Alma 7:8)

Alma₂ provides especially substantive evidence suggesting that the Nephites lack knowledge contained on the small plates. He seeks to understand or

11. Metcalfe makes some observations similar to those that follow, as will be noted, and he observes that concepts and language appear to develop parallel to a widely accepted Mosian priority dictation sequence (Metcalfe, "The Priority of Mosiah"). The present analysis acknowledges and confirms those observations, while offering an alternative reading that considers the narrative context, to be discussed later.

expound multiple doctrines and prophecies that are found on the small plates of Nephi, but he must toil to acquire them by revelation and uses restraint in expressing anything uncertain. Alma deliberately states what he does not know, what he gives “as [his] opinion” (Alma 40:20), and what he knows with certainty by revelation (e.g., Alma 5:46). He does not know when Christ would come (Alma 13:25), how the event would happen (Alma 7:8), or details as to the timing of the Resurrection (Alma 40:4–5). As the high priest, and because he is so cautious about speculating beyond certainty, Alma qualifies as a valid measure of general doctrinal knowledge. If he does not know a point of doctrine, it is plausible that no one else in the church would during that time.

Doctrines

In the period that opens as Mosiah₁ leads Nephite followers to Zarahemla, recorded doctrinal expositions and prophecies do not at first reflect the same understanding as Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob. Alma₂ and those preceding him diligently seek understanding of these doctrines, which return little by little, “line upon line” (2 Ne. 28:30), during something of a renaissance that begins in the second century BC.

Resurrection

“I have inquired diligently of God that I might know . . . concerning the resurrection,” Alma confides to his son Corianton (Alma 40:3). Alma describes this doctrine as a “mystery” that must be “unfold[ed],” which demonstrates that he does not have access to a satisfactory explication of resurrection doctrines. However, the small plates contain thorough expositions on the Resurrection: Lehi teaches this doctrine to his son Jacob (2 Ne. 2:8), who later speaks in great detail concerning the resurrection of the dead (2 Ne. 9:4–22). He clearly teaches that “the spirit and the body is restored to itself again” in resurrection and that the Resurrection brings to pass the judgment (2 Ne. 9:13). However,

this doctrine is not taught again with such detail until Amulek and Alma₂ teach the doctrine (Alma 11:42–45).¹²

King Benjamin does not speak much about the nature of the afterlife. He does not teach about a universal resurrection, though he does mention that Christ “shall rise the third day from the dead” (Mosiah 3:10). He only speaks of possibly being “received into heaven” or “brought to heaven” (Mosiah 2:41; 5:15).¹³ Most notably, he does not mention the spirit and body’s restoration to each other, as does Jacob, according to Nephi’s record of his teaching on the small plates. The word “resurrection” is only used by Abinadi (Mosiah 15:20–26), then Alma₁, both teaching that the righteous will be “numbered with those of the first resurrection, that ye may have eternal life” (Mosiah 18:9). Although they use the term “resurrection,” they offer little more detail concerning the afterlife than Benjamin offers his people. They make no mention of the reuniting of spirit and body.¹⁴

On the other hand, Amulek, likely having been taught by Alma₂ (the high priest), gives unprecedented doctrinal insights that “the spirit and the body shall be reunited again in its perfect form; both limb and joint shall be restored to its proper frame” (Alma 11:42–45). Doctrines he teaches, previously unrecorded in his century, include the reuniting of spirit and body in

12. For a more thorough review of doctrinal teachings on the resurrection, see Robert J. Matthews, “Doctrine of the Resurrection as Taught in the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 30, no. 3 (1990): 41–56. Matthews notes differences in the teaching of the resurrection by various Book of Mormon doctrine teachers, but he does not go so far as to say that understanding varies from person to person.

13. Mosiah 26:2 may indicate more had been taught, but it is not clear who taught it; this verse is referring to a time after Alma₁ enters Zarahemla.

14. Simply because the record does not provide these details does not in itself mean they were not known, of course. Roper contests that such is an “argument from silence” (Roper, “A More Perfect Priority?”). As demonstrated here, however, the text is not only doctrinally reduced for a large period but includes concurrent or eventual instances in which authors seek understanding of that which is not known, as especially demonstrated in the queries of Alma. The possibility that the Nephites may not have completely understood the doctrine of resurrection is also supported in the apparent confusion on the subject as later reported and clarified by Alma₂ to his son Corianton (Alma 40:15–18). There appears to be disagreement over terminology, perhaps originating in the way the doctrine is originally taught in this period, before it is more fully understood.

an incorruptible state and a universal resurrection for all, which then brings about divine judgment in the presence of God for both the guilty and the righteous. Nephi records all these doctrines on the small plates as Jacob had taught them: “the bodies and spirits of men shall be restored to one another . . . and all men become incorruptible, and immortal, and they are living souls, having a perfect knowledge like unto us in the flesh . . . and then must they be judged according to the holy judgment of God” (2 Ne. 9:12–13, 15; see 2 Ne. 9:4–22).

Spirit World

Alma 40 offers a particularly poignant window into Alma’s inquisitive mind and thirst for further spiritual understanding, in which he relates to his son Corianton that he has “inquired diligently of God that I might know . . . what becometh of the souls of men from the time of death to the time appointed for the resurrection” (Alma 40:3, 7). He relates that it must be “made known unto [him] by an angel” concerning this state of happiness or misery of the soul before the resurrection (Alma 40:11). Why must he “inquire diligently of God” and why must he receive angelic manifestations? Doctrines he learns after such toil concerning the “state of the souls of the wicked . . . as well as the righteous in paradise until the time of their resurrection” (Alma 40:14) are the first of their kind recorded in his century; yet they do not expand beyond Nephi’s record of Jacob’s public address teaching of states of “hell” and “paradise” before “the spirit and body is restored unto itself again” (2 Ne. 9:12–13).

Alma states that he must come to an understanding of the spirit world and the resurrection by seeking answers from God and then by receiving angelic declaration and other revelation (Alma 40:11) (see table 1). His awareness of the material on the small plates appears to be cursory at best. Yet, he is a diligent gospel scholar. It seems unlikely that Alma would have only a perfunctory understanding of a record so replete with the answers he seeks. More viably, Alma has no such writings before him to search, or is unaware of their existence.

Prophecies

“In six hundred years . . . ”

Nephi records three separate statements from three different sources that Christ would come to earth six hundred years after Lehi’s departure from Jerusalem (1 Ne. 10:4; 19:8; 2 Ne. 25:19). These prophecies appear to be unknown to the Nephites in the middle period, and nothing indicates that people observed their fulfillment at the time of their occurrence. By contrast, the biblical Gospel writers, for example, frequently quote earlier prophecies, testifying of their fulfillment (e.g., Matt. 2:17–18, 23; 3:3).

Alma’s brooding contemplations indicate that these prophecies are unknown to him. Although he knows of Christ’s coming, he is unaware of the timing of his coming: “And now we only wait to hear the joyful news declared unto us by the mouth of angels, of his coming; for the time cometh, *we know not how soon*. Would to God that it might be in my day; but let it be sooner or later, in it I will rejoice” (Alma 13:25, emphasis added).¹⁵ If Alma searched the records available to him, he makes no indication of it.

Christ’s Life

After an angelic visitation, King Benjamin prophesies of Christ’s life (Mosiah 3). Benjamin relates little that was not already recorded on the small plates.¹⁶ The account the angel gives Benjamin of the Savior’s life (Mosiah 3:5–10) is similar to that given by Lehi (1 Ne. 10:4–11) and Nephi (1 Ne. 11), except

15. Metcalfe observes the Nephites’ lack of awareness of this prophecy (Metcalfe, “The Priority of Mosiah”). Roper responds that the Nephites did indeed know of the prophecy and maintains that Alma 13:25 refers specifically to Christ’s coming to the people in their own land (Roper, “A More Perfect Priority?”). I agree that the specific verse alone is ambiguous, but little evidence supports the certain interpretation he asserts. To the contrary, Alma 7:8 indicates uncertainty that they would be visited at all, and whether it would be during Christ’s mortal life. It is not until Alma 16:20 that the Nephites receive a clearer understanding of his visit among them after his resurrection. A holistic approach to Nephite understanding during this period confirms their lack of awareness of the original six-hundred-year prophecy.

16. The angel does teach two new pieces of knowledge not recorded on the small plates, however: Mary’s name and the description of Christ’s bleeding from every pore (Mosiah 3:7–8).

Benjamin's address omits Christ's baptism and the exact time of his coming. Why would he need an angel to declare this account to him when it had already been recorded? Benjamin never cites earlier records as he speaks to the people, only the words of the angel.

Additionally, the angel's words to the people through Benjamin appear to be an *increase* of knowledge based on their righteousness. The angel says to Benjamin, "The Lord hath heard thy prayers, and hath judged of thy righteousness, and hath sent me to declare unto thee that thou mayest rejoice; and that thou mayest declare unto thy people, that they may also be filled with joy" (Mosiah 3:4). Because of their righteousness, Benjamin and his people receive the knowledge to follow, after much faith and prayer. The knowledge is new to them and could only be given by revelation. It appears the knowledge was not available to them by any other known means.

Christ's Coming Among the Nephites

Nephi receives a vision outlining the future destiny of his people, including the pinnacle event: Christ's coming among them. Nephi relates that he "saw the heavens open, and the Lamb of God descending out of heaven; and he came down and showed himself unto them" (1 Ne. 12:6). Nephi later relates these events in greater detail:

And after Christ shall have risen from the dead he shall show himself unto you, my children, and my beloved brethren; and the words which he shall speak unto you shall be the law which ye shall do. . . .

The Son of Righteousness shall appear unto them; and he shall heal them, and they shall have peace with him, until three generations shall have passed away, and many of the fourth generation shall have passed away in righteousness. (2 Ne. 26:1, 9)

Alma, however, is not clear as to any of these details. He writes, "I do not say that he will come among us at the time of his dwelling in his mortal tabernacle; for behold, the Spirit hath not said unto me that this should be the case. Now as to this thing I do not know" (Alma 7:8). Later, however, "they were taught that he would appear unto them after his resurrection" (Alma 16:20;

see also Alma 45:10). Alma's newfound understanding of this prophecy demonstrates that he is unaware of the small plates.¹⁷

Purpose and Destiny of the Nephite Record

Nephi also prophesies extensively concerning the purpose and destiny of the records he keeps. He relates details about the coming forth of the Book of Mormon to a gentile nation that would then bring the record to the Nephites and the Jews. The records would establish the Bible's truthfulness and restore the plain and precious things that are absent from the biblical record. These prophecies abound throughout the small plates (1 Ne. 13; 2 Ne. 3; 27–30).

Alma's musings, however, consistent with his carefully responsible yet enthusiastically inquisitive character, indicate that he does not know of these prophecies:

And who knoweth but what they will be the means of bringing many thousands of them [the Lamanites], yea, and also many thousands of our stiffnecked brethren, the Nephites, who are now hardening their hearts in sin and iniquities, to the knowledge of their Redeemer?

Now these mysteries are not yet fully made known unto me; therefore I shall forbear.

And it may suffice if I only say they are preserved for a wise purpose, which purpose is known unto God. (Alma 37:10–12, emphasis added)

Alma knows and senses that these records are important and will bring to pass “great things” (Alma 37:6–7). He surmises the possibility of greater conversions

17. Unbelievers' later complaints also provide evidence of the lack of universality of the knowledge of Christ's coming among the Nephites. Unbelievers reportedly “began to reason and to contend among themselves, saying that it is not reasonable that such a being as a Christ shall come; if so, and he be the Son of God, the Father of heaven and of earth, as it has been spoken, why will he not show himself unto us as well as unto them who shall be at Jerusalem? Yea, why will he not show himself in this land as well as in the land of Jerusalem?” (Hel. 16:17–19). It may be that the teaching of Christ's appearance to the Nephites after his resurrection (Alma 16:20) is not widely understood beyond those who are believers. Because it is a relatively new teaching for their time, unbelievers are perhaps complaining about something that had already been addressed but was not universally known. They would have understood, perhaps, had they listened to recent prophets and prophecies.

occurring due to the writings contained thereon. However, he is careful not to speculate when he cannot speak authoritatively on the subject. Again, it appears that Alma did not have access to the small plates, because he would have been able to cite Nephi's prophecies foretelling the coming forth of the Book of Mormon unto the Gentiles, then the Jews, and "the remnant of our seed" (2 Ne. 30:3–4; see also 1 Ne. 13:35–39; 2 Ne. 27) as well as Enos, who further prophesies in particular concerning the Book of Mormon coming unto the Lamanites (Enos 1:13, 16–17). He also ignores other prophets like Jarom, who expresses his understanding that the record he keeps is "for the intent of the benefit of our brethren the Lamanites" (Jarom 1:2).

Mormon and Moroni

Perhaps the most obvious evidence for the Nephites' ignorance of the small plates is Mormon's surprise upon discovering them. He must "search among the records" to find "these plates" (W of M 1:3) only after he has abridged the large plates through the account of Benjamin. Typically, Mormon incorporates various authors' accounts within the sequence of the larger narrative, but the small plates stand alone without his editorial hand. We do not know at what point during his abridgment of the large plates he reads the small plates, but the record suggests that by the time he had finished the abridgment, he knew the material on the small plates, and that influences his later writing, as well as and especially that of his son Moroni.¹⁸

Several more of Nephi's prophecies on the small plates are never mentioned during the centuries before Christ comes among the people. Then, after they are absent from the record for nearly a millennium, these prophecies vigorously reappear in the writing of Mormon and Moroni, who have the small plates before them. For example, while Alma appears to have no

18. Although Mormon states that he discovers the small plates while abridging the large plates (W of M 1:3), we do not know when he studies them in detail. He reads them enough to note the "prophecies of the coming of Christ," which are "pleasing to me" (W of M 1:4), though these words are written when he is "about to deliver up the record which I have been making into the hands of . . . Moroni" (W of M 1:1).

knowledge of earlier prophecies pertaining to the destiny of Nephite records (as previously noted), Mormon and Moroni express a more comprehensive vision for the records they keep. They repeat and confirm prophecies regarding the records' purpose (3 Ne. 29:1; Morm. 5:12–15; 8:26). Moroni's prophetic writings pertaining to a latter day (Morm. 8) all exist within the context of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon record: "And no one need say they shall not come, for they surely shall" (Morm. 8:26).

Many other prophecies, concepts, and phrases contained on the small plates remain absent throughout the middle of the Book of Mormon until they return in the writing of Mormon and Moroni, including:

- Seeing and speaking to a latter-day universal audience (2 Ne. 33:10, 13; Morm. 3:17–18; 7:1; 8:35; Ether 5; title page)
- Twelve Jerusalem judges and twelve Nephite judges (1 Ne. 12:9–10; Morm. 3:17, 19)
- The latter-day state of affairs: Book of Mormon to come forth in a time of unbelief (2 Ne. 26–29; Morm. 8:26–39; 9:7, 15; Moro. 10:24)
- Three witnesses (2 Ne. 27:12–13; Ether 5:2–4)
- "God who can do no miracles" (2 Ne. 28:6; Morm. 9:15; Ether 12:12)
- "He that shall" "bring forth" "this thing to light" "by the power of God" (2 Ne. 3:11–15; Morm. 8:14, 16, 25)
- "Voice" "crying from the dust," "speaking out of the dust" (2 Ne. 3:19–20; 26:16; 27:13; 33:11, 13; Morm. 5:12; 8:23, 26; Moro. 10:27)
- "Meet[ing] . . . before the pleasing bar of God" (2 Ne. 33:11; Jacob 6:13; Moro. 10:34)

In these examples, Mormon's and Moroni's language is at times so similar to Nephi's it is difficult to ignore a connection between them. Table 2 provides a list of the prophecies absent during the middle period that are reiterated by Mormon and Moroni. That these prophecies and lexical groupings are absent in the generations before Mormon provides further evidence that the Nephites are unaware of the small plates from the time (or before) Amaleki finishes them until Mormon finds them.

Observed Parallels Between the Small Plates and Mosiah, Alma

Of course, Mormon's collection and abridgment of the large plates are not without passages that appear to originate from the small plates. Despite variation in spiritual understanding as noted above, much common knowledge exists from one Nephite period to the next, such as the commandment to keep the law of Moses until it is fulfilled (2 Ne. 25:24; Mosiah 13:27–28; Alma 25:15–16; 30:3; 34:13–14).¹⁹ Joseph Spencer has observed parallels between the writing of Nephi and Zeniff.²⁰ John Hilton has observed textual similarities between Jacob and King Benjamin.²¹ Furthermore, Alma 36:22 appears to be a direct quote from the small plates (1 Ne. 1:8).

All of these anomalies suggest the existence of (at least) two parallel records, the large plates and small plates, from which later text may have been derived. Moreover, it is feasible that Nephi copied some of his original record onto the small plates, as he began the latter account after first recording thirty years of history and prophecy on the large plates (1 Ne. 19:1–2; 2 Ne. 5:28–30).²² The exact text of Alma 36:22, for instance, also appears very early in Nephi's second account—the eighth verse (1 Ne. 1:8)—which may have been copied from the large plates.

Though traces of Jacob exist within Mormon's abridgment of the large plates, they are relatively few. John Hilton points out several textual similarities

19. See Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 193.

20. See Spencer, *An Other Testament*.

21. See John Hilton, "Jacob's Textual Legacy," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 2 (2013): 52–65.

22. See John W. Welch, "When Did Nephi Write the Small Plates," in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon: The FARMS Updates of the 1990s*, edited by John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo: FARMS, 1999), 75–77. S. Kent Brown also addresses Nephi's copying from previous sources such as the book of Lehi and the brass plates in "Nephi's Use of Lehi's Record," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, edited by John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1991). See also David E. Sloan, "The Book of Lehi and the Plates of Lehi," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6, no. 2 (1997): 269–72.

between King Benjamin's address (Mosiah 2–4) and Jacob's address as recorded by Nephi in 2 Nephi 9, specifically within a span of only twenty-nine verses (2 Ne. 9:16–44).²³ Contrastingly, Jacob's influences on Moroni draw from a much broader range of Jacob's writings, including 2 Nephi 9 and Jacob 2, 3, 4, and 6. It is possible that Nephi recorded portions of Jacob's address on his large plates, perhaps before he made the small plates; Nephi recounts forging the small plates (2 Ne. 5:28–30) just prior to his account of Jacob's sermon (2 Ne. 6–10). Jacob's language is otherwise absent from most other writings until Moroni, thus more fully supporting the premise that subsequent Book of Mormon authors do not have most of his words.

Joseph Spencer notes several correlations between the record of Zeniff and Nephi's opening to the small plates, as well as connections between Jacob and Abinadi.²⁴ Although Spencer highlights striking similarities between Nephi and Zeniff's record, the use of the small plates as a template for Zeniff's record is problematic in at least one way: Amaleki still has the plates in his possession while he records on them the group's first and second trips to the land of Nephi.²⁵ As in the cases addressed above, it is possible that Nephi's parallel set of large plates may account for the noted correlations between portions of the small plates and the record of Zeniff and Abinadi's doctrinal teaching. At any rate, these exceptions demonstrate the book's complexity and defy the parallels with the dictation sequence that Metcalfe observes.²⁶

23. Hilton, "Jacob's Textual Legacy."

24. Spencer, *An Other Testament*.

25. It is intriguing, however, that Amaleki is personally connected with the group: his brother goes with them. The mysterious origins inherent in the characters of Zeniff and especially Abinadi and their temporal proximity to the small plates' intended deliverance into the royal depository do invite some amount of conjecture as to these persons' possible contact with Nephi's second smaller account. Even so, Zeniff's people fall into apostasy and Abinadi is martyred, and any knowledge of the small plates that they may have had does not appear to endure through subsequent generations.

26. Metcalfe, "The Priority of Mosiah."

Narrative Context

That Nephi's small plates are unknown to the Book of Mormon's most diligent gospel scholars of the second century BC is baffling and especially contradictory to Mormon's assertion that King Benjamin "took them and put them with the other plates" (W of M 1:10). Indeed, Amaleki states his intent to give them to Benjamin (Omni 1:25). How can these statements be reconciled with Alma's apparent lack of awareness of the small plates?

As mentioned above, Brent Metcalfe aligns the variation he sees in the text with the dictation order, which is an informative yet incomplete consideration.²⁷ In an effort to defend the book's historicity, Matthew Roper responds to the "purported anomalies" Metcalfe presents largely by making the case for unchanging prophetic understanding throughout the Book of Mormon.²⁸ The data presented in this analysis demonstrates that the latter static approach to the Book of Mormon text (not unique to himself) must be reconsidered.²⁹ Additionally, while acknowledging (and expanding upon) Metcalfe's observations of prophetic variation, the forgoing offers a reading that takes into account the literary context and maintains the literary integrity of the Book of Mormon. A broader view of the Book of Mormon narrative, considered through the lens of a principle laid out by its own prophets, provides a rationale as to the plates' absence during the second century BC.

"According to the heed and diligence which they give. . ."

The Book of Mormon itself characterizes individuals' and societies' spiritual knowledge acquisition as a dynamic endeavor rather than a static state of being. Alma₂ describes a positive relationship between people's earnestness toward the word of God and God's imparting of it:

27. Ibid.

28. Roper, "A More Perfect Priority?," 362.

29. E.g., Matthews, "Doctrine of the Resurrection," and Daniel C. Peterson, "Authority in the Book of Mosiah," *FARMS Review* 18, no. 1 (2006): 149–85 also offer a treatment of the text that asserts unvarying spiritual knowledge throughout its history.

It is given unto many to know the mysteries of God; nevertheless they are laid under a strict command that they shall not impart only according to the portion of his word which he doth grant unto the children of men, according to the heed and diligence which they give unto him.

And therefore, he that will harden his heart, the same receiveth the lesser portion of the word; and he that will not harden his heart, to him is given the greater portion of the word, until it is given unto him to know the mysteries of God until he know them in full.

And they that will harden their hearts, to them is given the lesser portion of the word until they know nothing concerning his mysteries.
(Alma 12:9–11)

A similar relationship between righteousness and prosperity is expressed numerous times as the Book of Mormon opens (1 Ne. 2:20; 4:14; 2 Ne. 1:9, 20), and as the text progresses, prosperity is understood not only to mean wealth but also security and protection (2 Ne. 1:9; Jarom 1:9; Omni 1:5–6). Throughout the Book of Mormon, the text draws a correlation between righteousness, collective security, and spiritual knowledge. These variables do not remain constant throughout the book, but all, including recorded prophetic understanding, ebb and flow. This is certainly the case in the generations following Nephi.³⁰

After Nephi bestows the small plates on his brother Jacob, they are passed from generation to generation, father to son and brother to brother, each keeping the record with varying degrees of conscientiousness. Also, in the generations following Nephi, prophets report a decline in righteousness, revelatory reception, and safety and peace. The people spiral downward from “prosper[ing] exceedingly” (2 Ne. 5:13) to “indulg[ing] themselves somewhat in wicked practices . . . under the reign of the second king” (Jacob 1:15) until eventually “the more wicked part of the Nephites were destroyed” in a few generations (Omni 1:5), which Amaron attributes to the people’s failure to keep God’s commandments (Omni 1:6). Five generations of small plates

30. For a thorough examination of these patterns, see Rebecca A. Roesler, “Heed and Diligence: Correlations of Righteousness and Truth in the Book of Mormon,” unpublished manuscript in author’s possession.

record-keepers (Jarom, Omni, Amaron, Chemish, Abinadom) become increasingly casual and lose sight of the record's original purpose, forgetting their father Nephi's original instructions to them (Jacob 1:1–2).³¹ Dissemination of spiritual knowledge ceases; Abinadom states “I know of no revelation . . . neither prophecies” (Omni 1:11).

Meanwhile, unlike Nephi and Jacob, a weak relationship appears to exist between the keepers of the small (originally more spiritually oriented) plates and the kings who have stewardship over the historical records. Beyond Jacob's subtle criticism of the people's hardening behavior “under the second king” (Jacob 1:15) and Jarom's mentioning that their “kings and their rulers were mighty men in the faith of the Lord” (Jarom 1:7), there seems to be little connection, personally at least, between Jacob's posterity and the kingly line. Not until Amaleki celebrates Mosiah, who, in contrast to the immediately

31. Jacob expresses understanding of the record's special purpose: “Nephi gave me, Jacob, a commandment . . . that I should write upon these plates a few of the things which I considered to be most precious; that I should not touch, save it were lightly, concerning the history of this people” (Jacob 1:1–2). Furthermore, he states, “For, for this intent have we written these things, that they may know that we knew of Christ” (Jacob 4:4). Jarom's writing does not reflect the same priorities. He states that he writes so that “our genealogy may be kept” and that it is “written for the intent of the benefit of our brethren the Lamanites” (Jarom 1:1–2). Although Jarom communicates the importance of obedience as his main message and includes the witness of the Christ to come as taught by others, he leaves nothing of his own witness for future readers. Omni, introducing himself as “a wicked man” (Omni 1:2), acknowledges the importance of obedience (“as I ought to have done”) but leaves no witness of Christ in his actions or words and states that the plates' only purpose is “to preserve our genealogy” (Omni 1:1). Amaron indicates that he understands the purpose of obedience and acknowledges that the judgments of God are the consequence of disobedience (Omni 1:4–7). He leaves no testimony of Christ, however. Testimony and doctrine in the writing of Chemish is nonexistent, and yet he declares, “And after this manner we keep the records, for it is according to the commandments of our fathers” (Omni 1:9). Abinadom, six generations after Nephi's mandate to Jacob, demonstrates some degree of understanding of the expectation regarding the keeping of the record. He states he knows of no revelation, but that “that which is sufficient is written” (Omni 1:11). It would seem he is saying, “I know I'm supposed to write the revelations we're receiving, but I don't know of any, so I guess what's there will do.”

previous generations, leads them “by many preachings and prophesyings” (Omni 1:12, 13), does an author mention a direct association with a king?³²

By the time King Benjamin receives stewardship over the main corpus of records (what we understand as the large plates), how aware is he of the small plates’ existence? Amaleki, upon observing that “these plates are full” (v. 30) and that he has no posterity to bestow them upon, determines it would be best to deliver them to Benjamin, “knowing [him] to be a just man before the Lord” (Omni 1:25). According to Mormon, Amaleki does just that, and King Benjamin then “took them and put them with the other plates” (W of M 1:10). What happens next? Do the people receive the records with rejoicing, public readings, or deliberate study, as with other acquired records, such as those of Zeniff, Alma, and the Jaredites (Mosiah 25:5–6; 28:11–19)? The text makes no mention of such a reception of the small plates.

Given the generations and centuries that have, by this time, passed through darkness, destruction, and casual record keeping by those who appear largely disconnected from the kings who keep the other records,³³ it is possible that, upon delivery, the value of the “plain and precious” record is not recognized (1 Ne. 19:3). Perhaps “this small account” (W of M 1:3) does not even make it directly into the hands of Benjamin before being filed away, perhaps in an unknown location. Or perhaps Benjamin is commanded to “keep them, that they should not come unto the world,” as Mosiah does the sealed portion of the Jaredite plates (Ether 4:1–2). Despite several conjectural possibilities, we cannot be certain of the plates’ location and accessibility in the Nephite library at this point. However, the Book of Mormon record itself provides evidence that, whatever the reason, the Nephites hereafter appear to be unaware of the small plates of Nephi, perhaps even as the account exists in their possession all along. With few exceptions (noted above) these middle-period prophets and kings do not

32. Interestingly, Mosiah is not reported as having been king in the land of Nephi. His familial connection to the original Nephite line of kings is not stated, but he does, of course, somehow acquire the records on the large plates; they are passed down to his son Benjamin.

33. Over the course of twelve verses (Omni 1:1–12), from Jarom to Amaleki, approximately two centuries and four generations pass.

reference or quote the material on the small plates. Several doctrines and prophecies contained therein are evidently unknown or eventually learned independently during the centuries leading to the coming of Christ.

Conclusion

The evidence herein supports the premise that the Nephites living after Amaleki (and perhaps before) are unaware of the small plates of Nephi until the day that Mormon finds them among the records. Alma₂ is a particularly helpful source regarding the Nephites' doctrinal and prophetic knowledge; he reports having no certain knowledge of a large body of doctrine and prophecies clearly written on the small plates. Additionally, many prophecies contained on the small plates are never referred to in subsequent books, missing from the record until they return prominently in the writing of Mormon and Moroni, after Mormon discovers the small plates.

The present analysis offers an alternative reading of the text that both acknowledges and expands upon Metcalfe's observations of the "less well developed" concepts of the "middle section of the book (Mosiah and Alma)"³⁴ while offering a literary rationale for such textual variation, thus maintaining the integrity of the entire Book of Mormon narrative as a whole—a narrative that aligns with principles laid out by the book's own prophets. Further, I offer a response to Metcalfe's hypothetical: "Why would Mormon or Moroni have inserted later, more developed elements into the narrative in some cases but neglected to do so in the homilies of Benjamin, Mosiah, Abinadi, and both Almas?"³⁵ Meanwhile, Roper's argument attempting to defend the Book of Mormon's historicity by asserting that its peoples' doctrinal and prophetic knowledge remains static and unchanging over a period of a millennium is indefensible—and ahistorical. Prophetic knowledge exhibited throughout scriptural texts does not remain constant. Acquisition of spiritual knowledge is instead represented as a dynamic process of development and, at times, decay.

I suggest that there is a viable reading of the Book of Mormon narrative that accounts for differences in language, prophecies, and doctrines

34. Metcalfe, "The Priority of Mosiah," 415.

35. *Ibid.*, 427.

taught during various periods of the book, a book that follows its own rules as to the spiritual knowledge acquired by its people. Despite Nephi's writing on the small plates "for the learning and profit of [his] children" (2 Ne. 4:15) and his directions to his posterity to "write upon these plates . . . things which [they] considered to be most precious . . . for the sake of our people" (Jacob 1:2–4), it appears that in only a few generations these "plain and precious things" are "taken away" from them until just prior to their final destruction (1 Ne. 13:26).

Doctrine	Small Plates	Benjamin	Abinadi/ Alma ₁	Alma ₂ / Amulek
Resurrection	"bring to pass the resurrection of the dead" (2 Ne. 2:8) "the spirit and the body is restored to itself again" (2 Ne. 9:13)	"received into heaven" (Mosiah 2:41) "brought to heaven" (Mosiah 5:15)	The righteous will be "numbered with those of the first resurrection, that ye may have eternal life" (Mosiah 18:9)	"The spirit and the body shall be reunited again in its perfect form; both limb and joint shall be restored to its proper frame" (Alma 11:42–45)
Soul between death and resurrection	States of "hell" and "paradise" before "the bodies and spirits of men will be restored one to another" (2 Ne. 9:12–13)	No mention	No mention	"state of the souls of the wicked . . . as well as the righteous in paradise until the time of their resurrection" (Alma 40:14)

Table 1. Recorded doctrinal teachings as taught by Lehi and Jacob on the small plates, Benjamin, Abinadi/Alma₁, and Alma₂/Amulek.

Prophecy	Small Plates	Large Plates	Mormon/ Moroni
Christ in 600 years	1 Ne. 10:4 1 Ne. 19:8 2 Ne. 25:19	Alma unaware: Alma 13:25 Samuel, “5 years more”: Hel. 14:2	Already fulfilled Mormon observes: W of M 1:4
Christ’s life	1 Ne. 10:4–11	Mosiah 3:5–10, by revelation, angelic manifestation	Already fulfilled
Christ among Nephites	1 Ne. 12:6 2 Ne. 26:1, 9	Unaware: Alma 7:8 Learned later: Alma 16:20	Already fulfilled W of M 1:4
Purpose of records	1 Ne. 13 2 Ne. 3 2 Ne. 27–30 Enos 1:13, 16–17 Jarom 1:2	Unaware: Alma 37:7–12	3 Ne. 29:1 Morm. 5:12–15 Morm. 8
Latter-day univer- sal audience	2 Ne. 33:10, 13	No mention	Morm. 3:17–18 Morm. 7:1 Morm. 8:35 Ether 5 Title page
The Twelve: Judges	1 Ne. 12:9–10	No mention	Morm. 3:17–19
Latter-day state of affairs: unbelief	2 Ne. 26–29	No mention	Morm. 8:26–39 Morm. 9:7, 15 Moro. 10:24
“God who can do no miracles”	2 Ne. 28:5–6	No mention	Morm. 9:15 Ether 12:12
“He that shall bring this thing to light”	2 Ne. 3:11–15	No mention	Morm. 8:14, 16, 25
Three witnesses	2 Ne. 27:12–13	No mention	Ether 5:2–4
Voice “from the dust”	2 Ne. 3:19–20 2 Ne. 26:16 2 Ne. 27:13 2 Ne. 33:11, 13	No mention	Morm. 5:12 Morm. 8:23, 26 Moro. 10:27
“Pleasing bar of God”	2 Ne. 33:11 Jacob 6:13	No mention	Moro. 10:34

Table 2. Prophecies as contained in the small plates, Mormon’s abridgement of the large plates, and the writing of Mormon and Moroni.